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## Chapter 12

### **Making art alongside each other in a therapeutic art studio: exploring the space between us**

**Helen Omand and Patsy McMahon**

#### **Abstract**

This chapter is co-written by an art therapist and a member of the therapeutic art studio, Studio Upstairs. Holding in mind their different roles and perspectives, the authors set out to explore the experience of making art alongside each other in the studio, where it is part of the ethos that art therapists are also practicing artists and make their own artwork in the group. The chapter is based around conversations between the authors and first distils some points about the benefits and problems of this practice in their community setting. Artist identity is found to be a shared place of overlap where shifts in role can happen, contributing to a more flattened hierarchy in the studio between staff and members. The authors then use four of their artworks to look at retrospectively together. In looking together, they discover that the artworks 'spoke' to each other both in the studio group and anew in the intersubjective space of their conversation. Here artworks brought up personal, social and political points of connection for exploration; gender, feminist thinking, being white and female born, being mothers of daughters, and being women artists.

**Keywords** therapeutic art studio, artists, artwork, alongside, hierarchy, looking together, intersubjective

*We sit in a large, dusty workroom. It is abandoned, tranquil and lit by the afternoon sun. Patsy thinks the tranquillity is left over from its previous occupants, who were weavers – the hours of meditative, methodical work imbuing the space with calm. The bare floorboards, where we place our artworks, are strewn with fragments of coloured threads. The room is soon to be knocked through by developers who are slowly refurbishing the building, but for now we choose it as our meeting place to hold a series of conversations. Its temporary nature lends it a liminal 'in between' feeling; it is a neutral space for both of us to talk and look together at our art.*

## **Introduction**

Our conversations were the basis for this chapter, which is co-written by Patsy, a member of a therapeutic art studio, Studio Upstairs, and Helen who works there as an art therapist. Holding in mind our different roles and perspectives, we set out to explore the experience of making art alongside each other in the studio, where it is part of the ethos that art therapists also make their own artwork in the group. Each day at the studio is staffed by art therapists and attended by a group of regular members who come and go as they like over the course of the day. We chose to write together because, over some years of knowing each other in the studio, we had shared many conversations about our art processes and we had exhibited our artwork together in group exhibitions on numerous occasions.

The ‘therapist’ making artwork alongside the ‘client’ has been controversial in UK art therapy history and we wondered what effects this practice had in our studio group and on our relationship with each other. We wanted to investigate this topic because, firstly, existing art therapy literature doesn’t include the client’s voice directly or in detail and has been written only from the therapist’s perspective. Secondly, existing literature doesn’t necessarily apply to our community setting and we had a hunch that the role of therapists’ art making would vary across settings and have a particular function in ours, Studio Upstairs.

The roots of Studio Upstairs are found in the revolutionary ideas of psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1960), which argued that the seemingly illogical conversations of people labelled schizophrenics were full of meaning and could be seen as a response to the madness of society, which was itself disturbed. Out of Laing’s ideas The Philadelphia Association was developed with its emphasis on therapeutic communities and the importance of patients being taken seriously as human beings. Psychiatric divisions of patient/clinician, well/unwell, mad/sane were challenged and equality in interactions was sought. These influences resulted in a particular approach at Studio Upstairs, including making art and exhibiting as a community. The studio is open all day for people experiencing a range of mental health difficulties to come and go as they like. Art therapists are also called ‘studio managers’ to reflect that the person is

not in 'treatment' but a 'member' of the studio community and an artist. In this chapter we use all these terms intermittently. One of the functions of the studio is to encourage people to find meaning in life through art and develop their artist identity, which is used here in its widest sense to encompass any aspects of art making processes; from our first experiences mark making and exploring materials to visiting galleries, talking about art and organising exhibitions, which members take an active role in.

For this chapter, we chose four of our artworks to look at retrospectively together and recorded our discussions. We used an empty workroom we discovered within the ramshackle arts building Studio Upstairs is housed in, which allowed us a separate space to speak in more length and depth than in the studio group. In the discussions more space was given for Patsy to respond to Helen's artwork than vice versa. This mirrors the delicate shifting balance of relationships in the studio: we simultaneously hold different roles, yet in making art and exhibiting alongside each other we are artists together. In writing together, we took on co-author identities, which was not always easy. Patsy said, "*I find it disturbing when emotional things are described in a clinical language. I've been disturbed by some psychiatrists putting my words into clinical language.*" Several times Patsy pointed out when Helen's therapeutic language put up barriers. We had to negotiate the language we used together. We use 'third person' to distinguish between our different viewpoints and 'we' for our shared author voice.

Drawing on our conversations we first distilled some points about the function of therapists making art and some potential problems. From these, we suggest that in our setting the practice enables different identities to be held simultaneously by therapists and members, with artist identity being a point of overlap. It is a rich meeting place where we can manoeuvre and shift roles; members sharing skills or advising and the therapist bringing imperfect human aspects of themselves in their art to be seen by members. This shared identity helps flatten hierarchies between staff and members.

Secondly, we ask, what about the art itself side by side? Both our artworks occupy the metaphorical space between us. Skaife (2008) has suggested this is an

intersubjective space, where an artwork's meaning is created between client, therapist, social context including the group, and the artwork itself. What is the effect of the therapists' artworks meeting the members' artworks in the intersubjective space? We found that our artworks 'spoke' to each other, both in the studio group and anew in the shared space of our conversation. Our art brought up personal, social and political points of connection; in our case, gender, feminist thinking, being mothers, and being women artists. As well as shared experiences differences emerged too, for example generational differences. Some were nuanced, for example, we discussed the way we identified ourselves: Patsy's working-class roots and her Irish British family's prioritising of politics and education; Helen's white middle-class English and Scottish background. There were also our experiences of art school and Patsy's experience in the mental health system. Our artworks 'belonged' to us individually as artists yet seen together brought these aspects into the space between us.

### **Issues provoked by the literature on making art alongside clients**

Studio managers at Studio Upstairs have been making art and exhibiting with members for over thirty years now, but this has not always been a fashionable or comfortable position. American literature has extolled the benefits of art therapists making art alongside their clients but the practice has been relatively unpopular in the UK. Historically, Case and Dalley actively discouraged art making alongside clients in their first handbook of art therapy (1993), suggesting the art therapist cannot simultaneously make art and hold the client in mind. That this view persisted might explain why Helen has often encountered surprise, interest and questions about boundaries from other art therapists. This is starting to change (see Mahoney, 2011; Marshall-Tierney, 2014; Nash, 2020).

Of particular relevance to the philosophy of Studio Upstairs is the potential role of therapist's art making to flatten the power dynamic of the therapist/client relationship. This is what Greenwood and Layton (1987) describe as 'side by side' working, a sense of equality between patient and client, exemplified by the group acting as the therapist, and the therapist joining in the art making. Hyland Moon (2002) also discusses the equality that it can bring; both parties involved in the shared creative task and equal under the gaze of the other. This has been noted too by Mahony

(2011) and Marshall-Tierney who notice the power balance of 'being with' rather than 'doing to' in a clinical context (2014: 99).

However, how and why the therapist's art is used seems to depend on the setting. For example, in his acute setting Marshall-Tierney (2014) suggests the therapist must be prepared to have their artwork freely taken and altered by patients. This didn't apply to our community setting with its emphasis on developing individual artistic identity and finding meaning in everyday life through art practice, and where there is more separateness between self and other. In some settings the therapist's artwork belongs purely in the intersubjective space (Marshall-Tierney would not take his work home for example). In contrast Rogers' account of her own studio in a residential setting has echoes of artist in residence – artwork is hers and exhibited later; 'It is hard to say how much of my artwork was stimulated by clients' themes, how much was countertransference, and how much was my own material' (2002: 70). These ideas were useful in thinking about Studio Upstairs where we felt that artwork, somewhat contradictorily, 'belongs' to the therapist's artist identity yet, along with members' work, is also part of the group's life. Mahoney's (2011) research suggests a way of investigating this relationship visually, by examining the therapist's and the group's artworks alongside to reveal the complexity of group processes over time.

We have to balance the evidence of the usefulness cited by the above literature with aspects that may be problematic, for example clients may feel distracted or intimidated by the therapist's art or experience the therapist as not fully present (Wadeson, 2002; Brooker et al, 2007). The discrepancy in the literature over this issue suggested to us that more communication about the role of the therapist's art making (why we are doing it, and how the client feels about it) is needed. We aim to add to this literature and help build up a picture of the spectrum of therapist's art making across settings.

### **Creating the atmosphere: some initial benefits and problems of therapist's art at Studio Upstairs**

We both observed that seeing everyone, members and staff alike, engaged in a creative process creates a particular ethos. Patsy found, "*it sets a kind of*

*atmosphere of people working, without someone specifically saying do this or do that. It's saying it's okay to do artwork. It's not saying it but demonstrating it.*" This puts art first and brings about an atmosphere of shared creative endeavour and absorption.

Bearing in mind the literature above, Helen wondered if there were unhelpful aspects that it might be harder to discuss. We talked about managers being trained in art and how it might feel if managers make skilled work in front of members. Patsy pointed out the nuances to this, *"It depends how you do it. If it's showing off, that's different to being inspired by seeing someone really involved and absorbed in their work and doing it well."* Helen wondered if envy in the studio could be problematic. Patsy felt, *"You wouldn't be human if you didn't occasionally envy someone, but I think it's not specific to member versus manager because there's a very wide gradient of skills amongst the members. Some people have not done art before, and others have been to art college."* We acknowledged that it was hard to stay with feelings of frustration if something wasn't turning out how you wanted, this might be exacerbated for members who haven't done much art before.

However, we felt that feeling dissatisfied and struggling with a creative process is a shared experience for members and managers. Managers can voice their difficulties or indecisions as they work, to model something about the uncertainty of the process. Members and managers can often be overheard saying, "Oh, I'm not sure about that bit." or we might have a moment where we really don't like our work and consider throwing it away or starting again. Making a piece of art involves tolerating the unknown as we don't know where it will go. It is a risk to commit a mark to paper. It is useful to get other people's opinion on the work too. For example, what colour might work, or when is something finished? Members comment on Helen's art, sometimes critically, for example saying, "Don't overwork it!". Seeing the therapist as a complex human being involved in an uncertain process with all its benefits and frustrations is levelling. The roles we play in the studio shift about and skill sharing is common. Members can teach managers techniques or advise. The back and forth lends an equality; we are in a shared struggle with art.

**Turning to the art: 'the tit power temple'; mothers and therapists in the studio**

Patsy chose her Talking Breast sculpture (figure 12.1) as the first artwork we would look at. The interactive sculpture is a large breast made of expanded foam. Inside is a little motor linked to software on a laptop, which drives a snake-like light around to a rhythm. Patsy described it: *“It was supposed to be an asp like Cleopatra’s breast. It had a speaker inside and a recording of me saying ‘I’m glad you came come to consult me as you did when you were young’. It was about early memories, memory before speech, before we can talk. Someone helped me with the technical bit, I wanted people to walk in the room and then the breast start talking. I exhibited it at Stoke Newington Library. At the exhibition I did a workshop with it too, with the help of my two daughters. The breast invited participants to make a breast from clay or record their earliest memories and each of my daughters, in their twenties, led one or other workshop. I called this The Tit Power Temple. I promised I would make a later artwork playing back the recorded memories with people’s clay sculptures of breasts. I later exhibited this at an exhibition in a derelict house in Peckham. The first workshop was very successful and generated a lot of excitement.”*

<FIGURE 12.1 HERE>

Figure 12.1 ‘Talking Breast’, by Patsy McMahon in exhibition at Stoke Newington Library

<FIGURE 12.2 HERE>

Figure 12.2 Interactive workshop installation by Patsy McMahon

Helen asked about its presence in the studio. Patsy said, *“It took a good while to make, and people were interested. It occurred to me that the talking breast was a metaphor for a therapist. There’s a lot of parallels with therapists and mothers in psychoanalytic thinking. I had the idea of this breast as providing a place you can go where there’s no moral outrage, you are who you are, no judgement. But there’s also a period of psychiatry and childrearing that blamed the mother for an awful lot.”*

Helen was interested in this visual representation of mother/caregiver in the studio and asked whether Patsy herself held a mother role in the group as a long-standing member? Patsy wasn’t sure about that, *“I don’t think it’s a good thing that even I’m seen as a mother, it’s not very freeing to always be seen in that role. I quite like it in a way, but I want to be free for people to see me as something other than that. I think*



*as a mother you have to carve out some space for yourself, from all the demand and need, and I think that's important for the child too.*" The breast sculpture suggests nurturing, protective aspects of caregiving, but Patsy's artwork had also brought up for us gendered expectations of 'mothering' in a patriarchal society: these themes came into our conversation in the present, and we wondered how ideas about 'mothering' also came into the studio group via Patsy's artwork.

This prompted Helen to consider her relationship as a therapist to the role of a 'part object' breast, and we mentally conjured up the image of Louise Bourgeois' sculptures with multiple protruding breasts. Mulling over Patsy's words, that mothers needed to 'carve out some space' Helen wondered if her own artwork was sometimes a way to retreat from the demands of being a symbolic caregiver and look after her own needs, amongst intense seven-hour days in the studio group. But how that might feel for members? She asked Patsy, *"Have you ever felt excluded or neglected when a manager's attention was on their artwork?"* Patsy had felt that, once or twice, when managers were heavily concentrating on their artwork for longer periods, but said if she wanted their attention, they would leave their artwork; *"Sometimes a manager has said, can you hang on a minute? And you can. We are grownups."* We reflected that the feelings it might bring up, of being neglected or out of mind, might echo powerful feelings from early childhood, which could be acknowledged or explored. Yet within our therapeutic community framework, it also seemed important that people could negotiate with the manager and each other to get their needs met, akin to relationships in the adult world. The above examples show how Patsy's artwork made visible, in a playful way, ideas about preverbal early feelings and their connection to adulthood and asks what do we expect from 'mothers'?

### **An ongoing process: constructing meaning in the intersubjective space**

The following example shows how an artwork accumulates layers of meaning in each new space it inhabits, which is useful in different ways. Helen brought her artwork of a clay egg, containing a dragon, for us to look at (figure 12.3). When she made the egg there had just been a major shift in Studio Upstairs' structure. Two groups of members had been amalgamated into one group, and Helen was working with a new co-therapist and everyone was struggling to come together. Helen said,

*“Whatever is happening in the studio at the time seeps into my artwork. I made the eggshell pieces separately from different clays and they dried too quickly. I spent days sanding them down, trying to get them to fit together (much to one member’s amusement who is a trained ceramicist). My struggle with the materials embodied the desire to make things ‘fit’ and the reality of the rather painful process the group was undergoing.*

Later a conversation started with a member who associated the two different halves of the dragon’s egg with skin colours. This brought up the subject of race in the studio; *“We spoke about two black members of the group who over the past year had lost their funding to attend, which had changed the representation of ethnicities in the group, I became aware there were more white members of the group, myself included as a white therapist. There was a need to think about this imbalance and their loss for the group.”* The artwork made unconscious material in the group visible in the studio, which helped us reflect.

<FIGURE 12.3 HERE>

Figure 12.3 ‘Dragon’s egg’ by Helen Omand

Patsy and I now opened the clay egg and considered it together. Patsy said, *“Looking at your artwork now, I like the dragon in there. I like the surprise of it. It reminds me of something that I’d forgotten about. When I first broke up with my partner, I’d been in a mental hospital and I’d been homeless, and I finally got a flat after I’d been in a hostel for nine months. I didn’t want to do any cooking in the kitchen, so I made artwork in the kitchen instead. I made a cast, with wax, of this frog and I filled it with blue vinyl. When I cracked open the mould this blue frog popped out. And it was sort of like a birth, of all these years of cooking that I had done and everything, and it was just so momentous that moment. I was in the kitchen, and it was so liberating to be doing artwork, because my partner never encouraged me in that direction, never made any space for me. It’s interesting that reminds me of that. The crack, and suddenness. It was a similar size.”*

We were struck by Patsy’s visceral associations to the work and how the sensory qualities of size, weight, shape, evoked vivid unexpected memories. Patsy noticed

the egg is broken which suggested a 'patching-up' and felt there was a parallel with how when women break down, psychiatry 'patches up' women, often sending them back into the same broken domestic situation. Previous themes of women's emancipation were evoked, and we felt this was an example of how our artworks 'spoke' to each other in the intersubjective space of our conversation, accumulating new meanings as we talked. They also brought up shared points of reference; the power of making artwork for oneself, taking up space as artists at home and in the studio and preconceived ideas about gender and domesticity. Patsy observed, "*Women in general have been brought up to be more considerate and think about other people more. There's both positives and negatives to that especially as an artist.*"

### **Contradictions: who does the work belong to?**

Helen asked if there was a particular piece of her artwork that Patsy remembered her making. Patsy said, "*There was a piece of your artwork which affected me a lot. I'm thinking about the one with the little cots. It took me back to when I was very little and I was in a nursery. They left us in these cots for hours on end and I remember being bored to tears. It was just after the Second World War and there was not much good childcare available. My mother was not aware of how neglectful they were and we were very short of money. She had to work as we were very reliant on her income. Luckily at home the atmosphere and care of us was good. I found it quite helpful looking at that work, because, I don't know why, it just brought up the feeling of this, but without it being... you'd done the work very carefully. Looking at the rows of cots helped me think about a painful experience but without trauma.*"

<FIGURE 12.4 HERE>

Figure 12.4 'Cradles' by Helen Omand

Helen felt that there was no fixed meaning to her artwork, it was available to be related to by members, to start conversations and explore experiences. This was unpredictable as there was no way of knowing what might move another, as Patsy's response shows. It might be tempting for an art therapist to stick to neutral themes, but in this context we felt art therapists needed to bring more of their artist selves and make work that was meaningful to them. Art can be fanciful, surreal or horrifying;

it can show our 'disturbed' aspects in a sublimated, transformed way, different to acting in a disturbed way or acting out.

The cradles artwork did not actually originate at Studio Upstairs, somewhat controversially (she felt), Helen had made the mould in another setting, and then brought it into the open studio to cast more cots and develop them into an artwork for exhibition. Helen had wondered in supervision where the work properly belonged – where was the boundary with personal artwork made outside the studio? Once present, the multitude of cots suggested a group, and evoked other responses, for example the nursery. The artwork developed a new life in the studio and the casting process generated interest in mould making, but it remains a grey area. This may differentiate Studio Upstairs from other settings as the art therapist's artwork is further along the scale towards personal art practice (Rogers, 2002) and further away from being pure response art (Nash, 2019), although how far will probably vary between individual therapists. We suggest the artwork belongs to the therapist but draws its meaning from each intersubjective space it inhabits: in the group, in exhibition, and here later in our joint conversation.

### **Last reflections: from the studio and into the space between us**

We next chose a series of eight paintings by Patsy 'Archetypal poses' (figure 12.5 shows three). We spent time arranging these on the studio floor. We debated hanging them, but Patsy decided she liked looking down into them, like pools of colour. She described them, *"I had some pictures of ancient Greek plaques and one was of a procession of people in particular poses. I got my daughters to dress up and position themselves in the same way and I photographed them in my mum's garden. When they stood in these poses they evoked particular feelings. It was a special, kind of magical day, in my mum's garden."*

<FIGURE 12.5 HERE>

Figure 12.5 'Archetypal Poses' by Patsy McMahon

Helen vividly remembered Patsy painting them and conversations arising in the open studio about play and people's childhoods. In the making of these paintings,

involving three generations of women in her family, Patsy balanced her identity as an artist with her identity as a mother, drawing on one to inform the other.

Discussing them we spoke about motherhood. Helen had been pregnant while working at the studio and so members knew she had children; unlike fatherhood, there is a visibility to pregnancy as a public life event. We observed that although we did not speak together in the studio group about our experience of being mothers, our artworks related or 'spoke' to each other. We noticed for this chapter we had chosen artworks, in response to each other, that referenced motherhood and childhood. This may also unconsciously reflect the generation gap in the intersubjective space between us, with its echo of mothers and daughters.

### **Conclusion**

Patsy commented that at art school tutors never revealed their own art practice, "*it was sort of shrouded in mystery*", leaving a sense that there was an aspect of themselves they weren't revealing. This preserved the teacher's role, and the power dynamic. At Studio Upstairs, managers making art helps shift the power dynamic and artist identity is a shared point of overlap. In this meeting place shifts in roles happen. Patsy said, "*You can negotiate hierarchies in the studio because they are more undefined in a way.*" Therapists, in trying to make work that is meaningful, are seen engaged in uncertain processes, struggling with art. Complex aspects of themselves are shown, a far cry from the all-knowing 'expert' clinician.

In the context of the studio group, we found that the therapist's artwork can make visible the preoccupations of the group. However, in our community setting it also 'belongs' to the therapist as part of their artist identity. The art object can hold these simultaneous and contradictory positions as it holds many meanings. We explored our artworks in the context of our memories of the group – but recalled retrospectively in our dyadic conversation in the empty abandoned workroom. We unconsciously chose our artworks in response to each other; other members and therapists would clearly have brought in different aspects of themselves and their artworks to the shared space of the conversation. Our artworks brought into the space between us personal, social and political points of connection and difference, and we wove new strands of meaning between them as we looked and talked.

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